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“IN SOME RARE AND SACRED DEAD TIME...., THERE IS A MIRACLE OF SILENCE” : ON NOT LIFTING THE VEIL IN MCGREGOR'S AND CUSK'S NOVELS

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1. The buzzing activities of city life were one of the Modernist tropes, as they dovetailed with the experienced fragmentation of subjectivity¹. In order to account for, and represent, this experience, the city was given a symbolic value that wasn't, and hasn't gone since, undebated². A century or so later, the city hasn't stopped developing, shaping geography and personal experience in unprecedented ways, the metropolis now basking in the glory of its being a hub for innovations, and no longer representing a place of decadence as it used to³. In the process, the city has become something less dynamic, and has been frozen into yet another cliché with which authors can be at odds: the city brings people together – closer? – in the same place. In a world so concentrated that everyone potentially can see each other at all times, the necessity to draw the line between the public and the private, between transparency and secrecy, between exposure and reserve becomes crucial to maintain subjectivity. In other words, subjectivity is now constructed as that which resists the standardized, transparent identity imposed on those that share a common ground, an identity that is founded on the myth of a widespread act of confession⁴.
2. The advent of portable technological devices, “a shortcut through all those streets” (*INSORT* 21), seems to reveal that, more than anytime before, people long to only “connect” (*INSORT* 202) in the words of E. M. Forster⁵. And yet, some contemporary British novels, such as Neo-Modernist

1 There have been numerous books and articles on the subject. See for example J. Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

2 See West-Pavlov (ed.). *Space in Theory*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009. R. Williams. *The Country and the City*, Nottingham: Spokesman, 2011 (1973) or D. Hardin, *Writing the City: Urban Vision and Literary Modernism*, London, Routledge, 2003 and S. McCracken, *Masculinities, Modernist Fiction and the Urban Public Sphere*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007.

3 This is the original myth which was developed against the desolation of the country life. See R. Williams, *Ibid.*

4 Confession (“*aveu*”) should be understood in its Foucauldian sense developed in *Histoire de la Sexualité* (I), *La volonté de savoir*, Paris, collection « Tel », Gallimard, 1976. New ways of confessing have now proliferated with social networking websites such as Facebook where people must post pictures, statuses and offer their lives on display for all to see.

5 This is the well-known epigraph to E. M. Forster, *Howards End*, London, Batam Books, 1980 (1910).

Jon McGregor's *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (INSORT) and Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park* (AP), explore the tensions between the subjective and the collective, the stable and the transient, what is left behind and what is preserved, thereby constructing the difficulty, if not impossibility, of inter-communication. Following in the footsteps of Tomlinson, B. Schoene affirms that "the globe appears to be shrinking, yet to the majority of people this is little more than a baffling *trompe l'oeil* of somebody else's projection"⁶. He also adds that "cosmopolitan representation must convey this synchronicity of the incongruous, multifarious and seemingly disconnected at the same time as it does its best to capture the streaming flow of a newly emergent-contemporaneity."⁷ This however is a plea for a community that would work across the board. The failure or success of this project is at the heart of McGregor's and Cusk's novels set in metropolises, and my exploration of the reasons why Peter Walsh's thoughts could be endorsed by many contemporary characters: "the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in Trafalgar Square overcame him. What is it? Where am I?"⁸.

Both novels resort to a structure that reinforces the isolation of their characters in a large city: McGregor's text alternates between sections that describe the reactions of the neighbours in a street on a particular day, as they witness a car accident, and sections focusing on the introspective narrative of a young woman who is about to become a single mother. Cusk's novel is the story of a day in the life of five women who are invited to a dinner party. Each section is devoted to one character, except for the sections dwelling on the rainfalls⁹. Very little has been published on both authors so far, despite the amazing quality of their writing and the intertextual references to Woolf, notably in the introspective, plot-less narrative¹⁰. Both novels are set in the suburb of a hypertrophic centre, which is never described, and depict the very English lives of suburbanites caught in the paradox of proximity and separateness, a sense of community and a sense of individuality, and this paradox is at the origin of their discomfort. In *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, Berthold Schoene analyses the contradictions at play in the general context of expanding cities from the Nancean perspective of "compearance,"¹¹ which gives a sense of an "apparent, yet far from actively neighbourly, proximity

6 B. Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, 13.

7 B. Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, 14.

8 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 44.

9 The disconnected form of Cusk's novel has led some to argue that it is a Short Story Cycle. See E. D'Hoker, "Linked Stories, Connected Lives: *The Lucky Ones* as Short Story Cycle" *E-rea*, 10.2 | 2013, consulted on May, 27th, 2014. <http://erea.revues.org/3230>. For its use about *Arlington Park*, see N.P Boileau, "Introduction", *E-rea*, 10.2 | 2013, consulted on May, 27th, 2014. <http://erea.revues.org/3190>.

10 See the online issue on Rachel Cusk was published in French-based journal *E-rea*, <http://erea.revues.org/2966>.

11 He defines "compearance" as a sense of community but a radical separateness. The self, according to Nancy is

of ‘others’.” (Schoene, 5) The question of the reserve, understood as that which is preserved from others, kept secret for the benefit of the subject or kept unsaid in spite of the subject's desire (an economic perspective in the Freudian sense) becomes crucial in this context. Reserve also calls for a very British feature for whom less is always more¹². In psychoanalytic terms, this can be linked to the concept of inhibition¹³ and the process of repression that is central to Freud's theory: indeed reserve can be regarded as the conscious act of concealing that which mustn't be said, refraining from yielding to that which may cause displeasure, or the product of an unconscious process by which something is made inaccessible. In other words, what could be mistaken for a polite silencing of one's thoughts can also be regarded as the inescapable repression of that which cannot become conscious¹⁴. It is a commonly held belief that Britain is no longer under the yoke of Victorian repression and yet, other forms have proliferated, especially in the anonymous city. That is why I am going to look at the question of silence as the sign of something (p)reserved, or unsaid, and see how these texts construct it as a form of subjective resistance to the dominating power of the image (reputation, story-telling) that transforms the individual into the universal of the anonymous city-dweller.

3. The neo-modernist fiction of the ‘noughties’ was written in the aftermath of 9/11, whose never-ending menace has led to a stifling of liberties. Subjectivity is now founded on an Other that is overwhelming, and pressurises individuals to enjoy and desire, so that subjects are left tired, destitute, distraught and ultimately undistinguishable (Gaspard). The “denizens” of *Arlington Park*, Rachel Cusk's “variation” on *Mrs Dalloway* (Latham), consider that an outing to the next-door mall is an adventure fraught with pitfalls, which they can only accept as a group, gathering to confront the Other, a potential enemy they might encounter. Yet, their comradeship is shown to be an association of separate beings, an addition of subjectivities that do not cohere into a team, thanks to the passive voice and the object of the gaze which is another community marked by indistinction: “The suburbs of Redbourne and Firley, seen through the windows of a car driven from Arlington Park, had an undistinguished aspect of organised anonymity.” (AP 79) By showing the complex

conceived as a singularity that can only exist in plurality. Schoene, 159.

12 Very little has been published on this specifically but it is a recurring motif in books on Englishness. See for example, Ruth Yeazel, *Fictions of Modesty*, Chicago University Press, 1991 or Nick Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction*, Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

13 S. Freud, *Inhibition, Symptôme et angoisse*. In this essay, Freud defines “inhibition” as the process by which a function such as work, or sexual intercourse, is impaired because it could cause anxiety (3-5).

14 On this aspect, Lacan's understanding of the unconscious processes differs from that of Freud. See for example how Lacan defines *Verdichtung*, *Verdrängung*, *Verneinung* and *Verwerfung* in *Seminar III*, J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire*, Livre III, *Les Psychoses* (1955-56), 95-97.

position of the individual lost in the “organised anonymity” of contemporary society, which fosters new forms of silencing and restraint, I will try to show how the Woolfian intertext is used to renew the representation of a crisis in experience. The development of giant cities flattens out a reality whose life Cusk and McGregor seek to retrieve, “in the service of a strategy too universal to account for individual lives.” (AP 79) McGregor and Cusk, like Woolf, try to account for the logic of silence that paradoxically prevails in a world of communication that makes reserve necessary to protect a part of oneself that is not to be seen, and even more blatant because of the promotion of endless ways of communicating. The meandering of the narrative voice through the streets of the characters’ psyches constructs a space whose appropriation, or lack thereof, and reduction to a cliché enables the authors to find a way of representing new forms of repression, or inhibition, resulting from the conflict between the impulse and the Ego (the ethical, imaginary dimension of the subject), a crisis that from a Lacanian perspective is inescapable, due to the subject’s lack of location within language¹⁵.

4. Both novels focus on the plight of individuals lost in the seemingly ordered space of (sub)urban life. Their characters form a loosely connected community tied around a city that is only seen from a distance: “I don’t remember seeing it, not the moment itself, I remember strange details, peripheral images, small things that happened away from the blinded centre.” (*INSORT* 7) Here we can see how flashes of experience and fragments of feelings are related to space and time, and not to a story. In McGregor’s text, the absence of names gives an impression of an ordered, rationalised reality where everyone can be counted¹⁶. Characters are designated by the street’s house numbers: “The young man at number eighteen” (*INSORT* 27). McGregor plays with the ambiguity of grammar and the genitive “of” seems to equate the person with their home: “in the bedroom of number twenty” (*INSORT* 28) or “in the kitchen of number seventeen the young man with the creased and sweaty white shirt puts a kettle on to boil.” (*INSORT* 160) People are reduced to numbers, anonymous prisoners in the city life of the end of the millennium, or specimens of a dying species displayed in a cabinet. The panoramic view of the city changes homes into beings, and people into fixed abodes. As Schoene remarks, this results in a juxtaposition that is typical of

15 See Pascal Pernot’s text : “un signifiant représente le sujet pour un autre signifiant” , formule à lire à partir de ce qu’elle implique comme effacement pour le sujet. L’être parlant n’est que représenté par le signifiant, révélant le paradoxe ontologique qui fait que le terme « sujet » désigne à proprement parler non un être, mais un manque-à-être vidé des bouchons des identifications imaginaires du moi, des rationalisations cogitantes de la philosophie, des espoirs substantialistes de la biologie. » <http://www.causefreudienne.net/du-sujet-de-linconscient-au-parletre/> (last checked on 23 June 2015).

16 Lacan in “The Mirror Stage” affirms that the subject finds its unity in the image of the other. He also states that the entrance in the imaginary is that by which everyone counts themselves as one.

globalisation¹⁷. It disconnects people, and deprives them of a story. The hyper-reduction of space to one street, where everyone – the young pregnant woman included – is seen in their homes could imply a strengthening of the sense of an identity, of an identification that goes beyond the metonymic associations pointed out by Mezei and Briganti, when they argue that the home, domesticity, is used “as a frame and metonym of inner, psychological space”, and carry along connotations of gender and status, in a problematic tangle of the notions of privacy, intimacy, and a sense of being. Identification here is to be understood in the Lacanian sense of an experience of *jouissance* by which the being finds him/herself in the image, as presented above. McGregor shows how home is the place of an absence of communication, and loneliness of the heart. The old man “with the weary lungs” at number twenty can’t tell his wife that he might have lung cancer, nor does he dare to tell her that he didn’t fight during the war: “he didn’t tell her anything, because there was nothing to tell.” (*INSORT* 178) The couple do things without exchanging words: he is considerate but there is a part of him and his experience that cannot be articulated. Interestingly enough, he chooses to find excuses in an absence of things to say rather than the presence of something he doesn’t want to let go of. Throughout the novel we see how this couple live their lives side by side, without entering each other’s hearts. Couples are disjointed, showing a lack of communication that sets each subject apart. This is set in parallel with the pregnant woman’s incapacity to talk things through about her pregnancy, both with her friend Sarah and her mother: “Mum I’m not sure how to say this but.” (*INSORT* 40), followed by “Do you know who the? / Have you thought about having a?” (*INSORT* 93); “And I think about the question my mother didn’t ask. Do you know who the?” (*INSORT* 95) The interrupted sentences leave both questions and answers unsaid, and reveal the difficulty of saying that which is emotionally charged, that which reveals unconscious, uncontrolled desires – unless the grammatical holes mean that there is nothing to say, and words are here to cover up that truth. And yet, the whole scene occurs on the phone, a technological device that was first meant to improve communication, bring people closer, but which has now become a tool of disconnection: “I hear her talking to Auntie Sue before she’s even hung up on me.” (*INSORT* 54) A similar situation occurs on the phone with the friend that she meets on several occasions and that never quite becomes her boyfriend: “he said excuse me, sorry, I need to, and he took a phone out of his pocket and went and stood by the door. / I watched him making a call, I wondered who he was talking to, I wondered why I didn’t think it was none of my business.” (*INSORT* 139) Social reserve is rent through with a desire to know. It is not the unsaid that is foregrounded here, with its promise

17 Schoene says the sense of affinity created in suburbia is “purely imagined, as not much social intercourse that would verify or contest the assumption ever occurs.” 154.

of revelation, but the very process by which something remains impossible to communicate. In Lacanian terms, the impossibility is another word for the absence of sexual relation which founds the subject¹⁸. Modern, contemporary devices, instantaneous messaging give a deceiving impression of connection that is now used to express or unveil the absence of relationship that the characters long for: “All the emails I get these days start with sorry but I’ve been so busy and I don’t understand how we can be so busy and then have nothing to say to each other.” (INSORT 26)

5. In *Arlington Park*, socialisation seems to be much more important, with women meeting up at school, going shopping or having coffee, but despite the geographical proximity, they fail to bond with each other, revealing an even more serious fracture than in their dysfunctional couples. It is noticeable that the novel barely resorts to dialogues and prefers to dwell on the conscious mind processes that give a voice to women whose quotidian stifles them. The novel opens with the re-writing of the Victorian *topos* of the heroine looking out the window to observe the world¹⁹. Juliet Randall feels unfit and musingly looks outside where people are going about their business in the rain: “It was early, yet already the streets were awake, subversively going about their business in the dawn.” (AP 7) Deadly anonymity is evoked by the personalisation of streets, which replaces subjectivity by collective space and carries a sense of depersonalisation. Juliet’s observation of the outside world leads her to realise that with her husband, they “were not joined but separate” (AP 7). She is not the only character who is as puzzled by her being in this place as she is by the place itself and its inhabitants, from whom she feels disconnected: “Like a settler in a new uncharted country, Amanda was aware of movements in her terrain: of the deep habits of herds migrating and convening across the reaches of Arlington Park, engaged in the unconscious business of their own survival.” (AP 56) Cusk’s writing is marked by the constant, merciless use of far-fetched, extended comparisons and metaphors which somehow yoke together ideas that are so disconnected that they promote a distorted vision of reality whose sense of truth precisely stems from its surprising nature²⁰. These comparisons are reminiscent of the metaphysical conceits, which prompt the proliferation of meaning as well as its inhibition. Here the comparison of suburbanites to a “herd”

18 Lacan, Jacques. *Le Séminaire, Livre XX, Encore*. Transl. Fink, Bruce, J. Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, The Seminar XX* « Encore ». See for example « Love is impotent, though mutual, because it is not aware that it is but the desire to be One, which leads us to the impossibility of establishing the relationship between 'them-two' (la relation d'eux). » 6.

19 Jean Rousset, *Forme et signification. Essai sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel*, Paris, José Corti, 1962, p. 122-131. Philippe Hamon, « Zola, romancier de la transparence », *Europe*, n°468-469, juin-septembre 1968, p. 386 and the rest of his work. See PhD thesis, E. Piton-Foucault, « La fenêtre condamnée Transparence et opacité de la représentation dans *Les Rougon-Macquart* d'Émile Zola », unpublished, 2012.

20 N.P. Boileau, 2013b.

and of Amanda to a settler isn't unsurprising in its content, but it is as far as phrasing goes. It connotes the inappropriateness Amanda feels, her unfitness that propels her into the role of observant. Surprisingly enough, for novels that sponsor subjective experience and personal feelings, the characters in McGregor's text and *Arlington Park* run the risk of growing unidentified. Despite the use of slightly odd names such as Amanda's neighbour Jocasta or Solly Kerr-Leigh (whose name is often mispronounced as curly), which recalls *Mrs Dalloway*²¹, what the women of *Arlington Park* aim for and fearfully achieve is indistinction: "There were so many people like Stephanie Sykes in *Arlington Park* that you could have laid them end to end all around Merylwood car park and still not have accounted for them all." (AP 86) These women have been 'murder(ed)' (AP 18) by patriarchy and the comfort of their homes seems to have sown the seeds of their wilful imprisonment: "Solly would sit on the sofa alone, feeling slightly implicated in all the life that was being lived elsewhere, as though she had suddenly become the head of an organisation responsible for despatching agents into the field of human experience." (AP 116) Even though *Arlington Park* describes a suburb peopled with privileged, middle-class, educated women, city life seems to have worn them out and they run away for shelter into a more polished reality that erases distinction or singularity: "she sensed again the presence of the aura of London, like a fog through which she couldn't properly make anything out." (AP 87)

6. The experience in the mall where all the women have to face a lecture on how to look good when your body ages forces them to step out of their comfort zone, their (p)reserve and expose unsuspected hips and curves:

In their underwear they looked strangely destitute, abandoned, like women whose husbands have gone off to war. They moved their learned purplish limbs, their complicated breasts and bellies, as though they were a little thrilled at their freedom but on the verge of a killing knowledge of what it implied. (AP 99)

The notion of the border and the glimpse of freedom they quickly dispose of can be reinterpreted in psychoanalytical terms. Expecting a sense of community derived from a similar social background, each woman has to come to terms with prejudices and a place that belittles their ego, and self-esteem. However, exposure means the necessity to take into account the singularity of a body that is usually covered up by everywoman's clothes. This symbolically evokes the lack of bonding that must be bridged by appearances. This scene is the occasion for Maisie to express her uncertainty

21 R. Bowlby, « Real Life and its Readers in *Mrs Dalloway* », in C. Bernard, *Woolf as Reader/ Woolf as Critic, or the Art of Reading in the Present*, Montpellier, Presses Universitaires de Montpellier, 2011, 19-38.

about her move to Arlington Park, which only arouses Stephanie's curiosity, and Christine's shock. The latter thus needs to hammer out a message of comradeship and community, which is shown to be unfounded in the length of her tirade (contrasting with the small-talk one-liners that precede) and the few swear words that she uses in the process, words that are quite out of character and show her true colours:

Let me tell you, there's no bloody excuse for going to seed in Arlington Park!' exclaimed Christine. 'For people, it's not second-best to anywhere. They may not have degrees, or doctorates, or fascinating jobs – they may not be the wealthiest people you've ever met, or the most famous or important, but believe me, the people I see here every day are the most diverse, interesting, courageous group of people you'll find anywhere! Take the women I meet at the school gate,' she continued with her mouth full. 'You could say they're not important, you could even say they're not great intellectuals. The fact is that they do a bloody good job, and they're all interesting, compassionate people. They all want to help each other, make life easier for each other – they'll pick your child up from school if you're running late, they'll do your shopping if you're ill, and all of them have got children to pick up and houses to run themselves. I mean, how many people do you know in London who would care if you dropped dead in the street?'

At this juncture Stephanie excused herself and took Japser off to the toilet. (*AP* 103-104)

7. It is only the imperious need of a child that can stop a speech whose length suggests that it isn't spontaneous. If only for interrupting a discussion that was underlying, this child's need is inappropriate. The self-proclaimed principles of morals, consideration, neighbourly assistance turning Arlington Park into a haven of comradeship are undermined by this articulated speech that reveals fractures unknown to the subject that speaks them. For instance, Christine's idea of diversity does not include the people she sees at the mall and whom she despises, nor does it include the possibility for Maisie to think differently about Arlington Park. The rifts between the homogenous lifestyle and the heterogeneous, subjective experience is repeatedly shown by the narration that subtly cuts this rant short: British community is imposed by standardisation of thought and normalisation of behaviour. In a word, if there is no Other, i.e. no representation of alterity, lack comes to lack and the subject can only go through a crisis²².

8. The dislocation of relationships in these novels is structurally inscribed in the silent moment of pause with which the novels open, before the narrative probes into the characters' subjective experience. It is the programmatic experience of solitude, lack of communication and subsequent

22 J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire X, L'Angoisse*.

reserve that all the characters will then grapple with. This pause enables the narrators to describe the city in a way that renews the literary *topos* of the incipit: is this a realistic description of a city that has become a common place? Or is this an imaginary projection of the characters' subjective perception? *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* opens with the description of a city in the early hours of the morning. What strikes the reader is the immediate grammatical arm-twisting due to the use of the unusual dislocation, "the city, it sings". This is made conspicuous through the refusal of basic grammar rules – no capital letters to start sentences, no full stops, the use of the present simple – in direct link with the meaning of the sentences. "and it stops" doesn't stop syntactically but stands out for two obvious reasons: first the sentence is going to be repeated in multiple variations throughout the first section, starting a long, paradoxical process of repetitive interruptions that precisely fail to bring the narrative to a standstill. The other reason is that there is no stop to this sentence. Paradoxically, where the action is suspended, the text can't be interrupted, can't break. The accumulative narrative of the first lines resists the narrator's aborted attempts to freeze the city:

and it stops

in some rare and sacred dead time, sandwiched between the late sleepers and the early risers, there is a miracle of silence.

Everything has stopped.

And silence drops down from out of the night, into this city, the briefest of silences, like a falter between heartbeats, like a darkness between blinks. (INSORT 3)

The narrator's intention is to describe the tipping point before dawn cracks. It is later revealed that it was the moment after the accident that is only told towards the end of the novel. In any case, this is an opening that destabilises the rules of story-telling: first of all, it opens on a moment of pause, like in *The Real Inspector Hound*²³. Secondly, the city is described in its detail and yet it is unrecognisable: no distinctive monument is mentioned, no precise time, and the city becomes realistic, vivid and fictional at the same time. The taxonomical approach of the first line, which is also present in *Arlington Park*'s rain interludes, can be interpreted as a concentrated vision of a cliché that can only be renewed thanks to subjective expression. Unlike the London that Clarissa and Elizabeth Dalloway seem to discover, or rather uncover, as they walk its streets on that day in June, both contemporary novels present us with a city that is already said, already articulated, as proves the use of the determiner "the", where there is nothing to discover, used in the opening

²³ Tom Stoppard, *The Real Inspector Hound*, London, Faber and Faber, 1970.

description by an anonymous narrator that addresses the reader:

Listen, and there is more to hear.

The rattle of a dustbin lid knocked to the floor.

The scrawl and scratch of two hackle-raised cats (...)

And the clubs in the centre, they are empty.... (INSORT 2)

9. In the words of J.-J. Lecercle, one can hope to say the last word, but one will never say the first²⁴. The city that is described is a city that has already been described, leaving little room for the subjective experience. This opening sets the tone for a narrative that fluidly skirts around traumatic experiences which fail to be expressed and a living object that's flattened out by its contemporaneity. The description of the city as "empty and quiet and still" (INSORT 33) is the condition for the multiplication of voices, thoughts and the exploration of the characters who animate it. It is the effect, rather than the backdrop, of the unsuccessful conversations and dialogues. The pause in life is on a par with the pauses in language. Clichés are never said out loud as can be seen in the numerous examples of reported speech that silence the characters: "We talked about other people, saying do you remember when, and how funny was that, and I wonder what happened to." (INSORT 23) These pauses, in which the end of the sentence is suspended in mid-air, respond, and can be likened, to the pause that opens the novel. It signals the lack that is at the heart of contemporary globalisation and subjectivity. Characters do not speak to each other (INSORT 187), people leave empty voicemail (INSORT 235). The pause is the expression of inhibition and of the impossibility to articulate things that haven't been thought before: "I said all of this very quietly, and I was amazed to hear the words coming out at all, like butterflies wriggling through net curtains." (INSORT 141)

10. *Arlington Park* also starts with a pause, a pause due to the very English rain that washes away street animation and provides the author with a new way of describing the suburbs dynamically. Here again, the description entails an already-said that is signalled by the use of the determiner THE "the boys laughed uneasily", "the pubs and restaurants", "the grimy Victorian streets" (AP 2-3). None of this needs introducing, so hackneyed and contemporaneous is city life. However, the narrative of it undermines this impression. The focalisation follows the rain as it starts falling over

24 Lecercle, Jean-Jacques. « Du Cliché comme réplique », in G. Mathis (dir.), *Le Cliché*, Toulouse, Presses Universitaires du Mirail, « Interlangues littéraires », 1998, 127-149.

the various houses, buildings, streets and people. At this early stage in the novel all the people remain anonymous (as in McGregor's novel) and there is no indication whatsoever that the people in this introductory chapter are part of the recurring characters; indeed it is the very notion of "character" that is challenged. In order to represent the relentless rainfall, the anaphora "it fell", and its variation "the rain started to fall" echo the obsessive quality of modernist writing, and especially the opening section of *Mrs Dalloway*, where the sound of Big Ben striking the hour rhythmically propels the character out of the house and into the buzzing city. *Arlington Park*'s beginning could be construed as the negative/ the reverse of *Mrs Dalloway*²⁵ in the sort of eerie quality it gives to a city that is immediately presented as fiction, as a literary pastiche:

The clouds came from the west: clouds like dark cathedrals, clouds like machines, clouds like black blossoms flowering in the arid starlit sky. They came over the English countryside, sunk in its muddled sleep. They came over the low, populous hills where scatterings of lights throbbed in the darkness. At midnight they reached the city, valiantly glittering in its shallow provincial basin. Unseen, they grew like a second city overhead, thickening, expanding, throwing up their savage monuments, their towers, their monstrous, unpeopled palaces of cloud. (AP 1)

The opening comparisons of this paragraph are on a par with the concluding ones that sow together threads that are going to be unfolded throughout the novel: the house/ palace always runs the risk of being unpeopled, of failing to successfully shelter a subject that is perceived as falling short of finding a niche for herself: "In that moment Amanda knew that her kitchen was too large. She would not have thought such a thing was possible, but entering it now she knew that it was true. They had knocked through until they had created not space but emptiness." (AP 63-64) The city, like each house, verges on the monstrous, a quality that threatens to squash individuals. In the meantime, Cusk resorts to Gothic images when the clouds reach the city, transforming it into a "second city", an imaginary mirror city. This is the point where Cusk's city intersects with McGregor's and Woolf's. Indeed, the eerie, uncanny, unhomely quality of the city is caused by the rain that freezes it in a tableau:

The rain fell on the tortuous medieval streets and the grimy Victorian streets and on the big bombed streets where shopping centres had been built. It fell on the hospital and the old theatre and the new multiplex cinema. It fell on multi-storey car parks and office blocks. It fell on fast-food restaurants and pubs with Union Jacks in the windows. (AP 3)

25 M. Latham, « *Arlington Park: Variations on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway** », in N. P. Boileau, C. Hanson et M. Tang (ed.), *Kay Boyle/ Rachel Cusk: (Neo)Modernist Voices*. (2013c)

11. The realist details of what is a common experience of city life for most of Cusk's readers contrast heavily with the fictional, unreal nature of the rainfall's effect that seems to turn the city into a mere shadow (*INSORT* 223) of itself: 'The rain had stopped. The park stood wet in the new afternoon light, as if it had just been born.' (*AP* 141) In the process, the city becomes an element of fiction that contains different layers of stories, times and history, like the London Clarissa goes through. Elements of Americanisation, or rather globalisation, of the open market have been laid next to traditional British milestones, and the rain reveals their incoherent dimension as well as their potential for a fictional experimentation. McGregor's text similarly describes the city of today, but stopped it in its daily business in a fashion that only fiction can coin. The dramatic potential of the rain falling over the city is also used in his text, towards the end, as the narrative is about to disclose the reason why this street was the object of a novel (*INSORT* 207). Again syntax becomes disconnected, with the word "and" repeatedly closing the paragraphs and the sentence running onto the next paragraph.
12. The city becomes a metaphor for subjective experience, another common place (note the repetition of "everyone" and other forms of the collective in McGregor's fiction) which linguistically is contaminated by people's absence of communication. This hole in people's interaction, the silence of the main characters points to the things that are left unsaid, kept quiet or unarticulated. It is a symptom reflecting a form of repression that is imposed by a society whose judgement is all-encompassing. Throughout the novel, things are interpreted by McGregor's characters, to the extent that obsessively these objects seem to send out signals: "Listen, and there's more to hear" (*INSORT* 1) could be understood as "read, and there's more to understand". Language enables the author to go beyond the mere, positivist description of an item of news that would have gone unnoticed – a car crash in a street of a large city, on the day when, across the Channel, Princess Diana's death in a similar car crash would bring the world, or at least the world's media industry, to a standstill. The main character keeps looking at her own body to see the changes brought about by her pregnancy, but the underlying comparison is that she is reading it, trying to interpret it as the expression of her subjectivity, rather than from a scientific standpoint, for which the same cause always produces the same effects ("As though I could read my blemishes like Braille" (*INSORT* 26)). The obsessive nature of McGregor's descriptions, his attention to minute details that fail to give a sense of the whole, the overwhelming presence of obligatory elements that become lifeless, reflect the obsessive quality of thought processes, mostly based on a lack of connection or knowledge, and reserve becomes the sign of that which goes lacking, a lack which is

the very condition of human experience according to Lacan, in the second phase of his teaching²⁶: “and he wonders again why he thought about her so much when he knows so little to think about.” (INSORT 89). This shows that it is not so much the content of the unsaid that matters but the reserve as the sign of something beyond meaning which drives someone towards someone else, despite the experience of disconnection this sign causes. The characters are mere shadows, giving away so little of them that it is only through a sustained metaphor that McGregor gives a sense of the isolation and desolation of these: “we say goodbye, and I go up to my flat and sit by the window without turning the lights on, watching the traffic and thinking about how little I said to him on the way back.” (INSORT 187) Juxtaposition is the new mode of living, and writing, a grid that replaces subjectivity, and this is reflected in McGregor’s extensive use of grammatical dislocations and coordination, parataxis, present simple, so as to avoid any anchorage. Rapidly, like Cusk’s city, his becomes a city of words, an “insubstantiation”, in the words of Woolf²⁷: the heroine fails to connect with her friend, despite his many visits and his injunction to tell something “that really happened to you, not something you’ve seen or read about but happened to you” (INSORT 232). “I can’t decide how to answer him, I start to say something deflective, something like well it was okay I think they’ll come round, something that will slip from the question like shrugged shoulders from a shawl but the words stick in my mouth.” (INSORT 201)

13. In Jon McGregor's *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* and Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park*, the characters are grappling with an urban space that leaves but little room for subjectivity and the opening moment of pause produces a narrative that fails to be located within any established tradition, hesitating between the social, thematic representation that could be the object of cultural theory, and the more stylistic dimension that founds literary theory. However, none of them embarks in the footsteps of postmodernism by which pastiche and discourses become the toys of a deconstruction that *in fine* jeopardises the rules of realistic representation. These two novels renew the modernist quest for new forms of expressions of subjectivity. Borrowing from Woolf’s celebration of the city in *Mrs Dalloway* that promotes a fragmentation of experience that is in keeping with the elation of the turn of the century and the conception of time, and space, as fragmented and united in fragmentation, the post-structuralist stance of Cusk’s and McGregor’s

26 J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XI, Les Quatre Concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*.

27 “But now what do I feel about *my* writing? – this book, that is, *The Hours*, if that’s its name? One must write from deep feeling, said Dostoevsky. And do I? Or do I fabricate with words, loving them as I do? No I think not. In this book I have almost too many ideas.... Its only the old argument that character is dissipated into shreds now: the old post-Dostoevsky argument. I daresay its true, however, that I haven’t that ‘reality’ gift. I insubstantise, wilfully to some extent, distrusting reality – its cheapness. But to get further. Have I the power of conveying the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself?” V. Woolf, *Diary* vol.2, 248, *sic*.

fiction suspends the city in mid-air, half-way between the realism of yonder days and the fantasy of a fictional form in order to show the disappearance of the Other and to promote individual fragmentation. Silence and lack of communication perpetuate a very British cliché that is revived in the context of the literature of trauma (a car accident, 9/11, etc.). The imposed urge to confess and express it all creates new ways of repressing desires, a repression that is a response to the absence of an Other that guarantees truth and the persistent lacking nature of language. It is the sign, not the explanation of, something that is yet unknown to the subject. Let us bear in mind, as G. Pommier reminds us, that Freudian and Lacanian unconscious are not to be understood as a stock (or reserve) of ideas and desires that need to surface to consciousness. It would be more precise to define the unconscious as that where the subject isn't – suggesting another definition for reserve as that which is no longer accessible²⁸.

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28 G. Pommier, *Comment les neurosciences démontrent la psychanalyse*, 219-220.

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